

**Suggested Remarks  
Laura Coughlin  
PEER's Master Instructors' Workshop  
Opening Ceremony  
February 27, 2006, 0900H  
Best Western Astor Hotel, Makati City**

The Honorable Undersecretary of Department  
of National Defense;

Dr. Anthony Golez, Deputy Administrator of  
the Office of Civil Defense;

Professor Vinod Sharma, Chief of Party of  
the Program for Enhancement of Emergency  
Response or PEER;

PEER Country Representatives from  
Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal and the  
Philippines;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and gentlemen:

Good morning!

On behalf of the United States Government, I am pleased to join you today to be part of the opening ceremony of this regional training program, "Master Instructors' Workshop," organized by the Program for Enhancement of Emergency Response, whose goal is to improve the standards of disaster preparedness and response in the five participating countries, namely: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines.

First, and again on behalf of the U.S. Government, let me extend my condolences to our Filipino colleagues here for the tragic loss of life and hardships that have occurred as a result of the deadly landslide in St. Bernard

Municipality, Southern Leyte 10 days ago. The United States, along with many other countries, international organizations, local NGOs and private sector groups, has supported the rescue and relief efforts led by NDCC and local authorities in Southern Leyte. American Military personnel were immediately diverted from the annual Balikatan exercises to assist with relief efforts on the ground in Southern Leyte, working to clear debris and mud in order to conduct search and rescue operations. In addition, the U.S. Government is providing emergency funds along with much-needed supplies such as blankets, water, and plastic tarps for evacuated families. We are continuing to closely monitor the situation and assess relief needs.

The tragedy in Leyte brings home the critical importance of the work the PEER program is doing. When I attended the PEER Regional Planning Meeting here in Manila last October, with our USAID/Philippines' Mission Director Jon Lindborg, it was in the wake of the earthquake in Pakistan and Hurricane Katrina on the gulf coast of the United States. This time, I am here in the wake of the Leyte disaster, which although smaller in scale, is of course nonetheless devastating for those affected. Unfortunately, natural disasters are becoming all too familiar. All of our countries are already vulnerable to natural disasters, but they are likely to become more frequent - and perhaps more severe - with global trends including increasing population density and climate change, and other phenomena

like the possible La Nina episode in the Pacific Ocean that may be responsible for bringing the above average rainfall to the Philippines. It is more imperative than ever to be prepared and that is what PEER is all about.

It is, therefore, a distinct privilege for the U.S. Agency for International Development to play a part in supporting this very timely workshop, principally through our Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance's (OFDA) regional grant with the National Society for Earthquake Technology based in Nepal, which is the lead implementer of the PEER program.

The USAID Mission in the Philippines has kept the importance of disaster preparedness

very much in our radar screens. The Philippines, after all, is one of the most natural disaster prone countries in the world. It is known for its Mount Pinatubo eruption, disastrous typhoons, floods, and now the tragic landslides in Southern Leyte. This recent disaster, and the reports that there are six municipalities in Central Mindanao that face threats of landslides and flash floods, and the reported recent "rumblings" of Mayon Volcano that could be signals of coming eruptions - all have led to an increased focus on geological hazard mapping and the importance of disaster preparedness in general.

We are pleased to know that NSET is now in the stage of helping the five participating countries institutionalize the PEER courses in

their respective countries. The training of a cadre of Course Coordinators and Course Monitors for each of the participating countries who will assist their respective nodal agencies in implementing the PEER courses can certainly take pride in themselves for being instrumental in disaster planning and preparedness in their countries. No country can rely solely on international help, as generous as the international community can be. International search and rescue teams simply take too long to get into Ground Zero. It is usually local people and local authorities who save the most lives. So, building local skills in such areas as collapsed structure search and rescue and medical first response is critically important.

By institutionalizing the PEER program, the Course Coordinators and Monitors can work together with their respective countries toward more effective planning and preparing for disasters, including training their rescuers and first responders and improving their coordination mechanisms. This will help avoid the unnecessary loss of life.

The U.S. Government recognizes and appreciates that all the participating countries represented here today have keen governmental and civil society interest in PEER and its goals of disaster preparedness. This is a very significant factor in terms of the program's success and institutionalization because both government and civil society have roles to play - and responsibilities - in



disaster planning and response including training, capacity building, coordination, and deploying cadres of rescuers, responders, hospital preparedness professionals, and information managers. All of these groups are important to developing, ratifying and implementing successful national disaster management strategies. I congratulate PEER and all the participating countries for taking this comprehensive, holistic approach to the complex challenges that disasters present.

In closing, I would also like to commend the hardworking management and staff of the Office of Civil Defense and the National Society for Earthquake Technology for sponsoring and organizing this very worthwhile and timely workshop.

I wish you all a productive and fruitful  
workshop.

Thank you.